DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 440 407 CS 217 094

AUTHOR	Landry, Danielle
TITLE	Can Writer's Workshop Be Successful in the First Grade?
PUB DATE	2000-05-00
NOTE	16p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Classroom Techniques; Grade 1; *Instructional Effectiveness; Primary Education; Teacher Behavior; Writing Achievement; *Writing Instruction; Writing Processes; *Writing Workshops

ABSTRACT

Writer's Workshop is a program that teaches children the conventions of writing. Students not only learn proper grammar and punctuation; they also come to learn and value the importance of drafting, revising, and editing their pieces of writing. Writer's Workshop is a process that needs to be consistent. It is composed of three parts. The first part is the mini-lesson where the teacher meets with the whole class and discusses writing concerns. The second part is conferencing, where the teacher meets with individuals or small groups. The third part is sharing, where the students publicly share a part of their work. Writer's Workshop is an excellent way to prepare students for state tests. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has indicated that 75% of our nation's children are writing on an average level. Of this percentage, students received higher scores on writing assessments who spent time in the writer's workshop. Research indicates that writer's workshop provides an excellent way to support and teach young children how to become good writers. Teachers who use writer's workshop in the classroom agree that writer's workshop prepares students for conventional writing. (Author/RS)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 440 407

Can Writer's Workshop be Successful in the First Grade?

Danielle Landry

Abstract

Writer's Workshop is a program that teaches children the conventions of writing. Students not only learn proper grammar and punctuation, they also come to learn and value the importance of drafting, revising, and editing their pieces of writing. Writer's workshop is a process that needs to be consistent. It is compiled of three parts. The first part is the mini-lesson where the teacher meets with the whole class and discusses writing concerns. The second part is conferencing where the teacher meets with individuals or small groups to teach into their writing. The third part is sharing where the students publicly share a part of their work. Writer's workshop is an excellent way to prepare students for state tests. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has indicated that 75% of our nation's children are writing on an average level. Of this percentage, students received higher scores on writing assessments who spent time in the pre-writing stage, wrote a second draft, and spent time on content- all of which are part of writer's workshop. Research indicates that writer's workshop provides an excellent way to support and teach young children how to become good writers. Teachers who use writer's workshop in the classroom agree that writer's workshop prepares students for conventional writing. Elementary teachers should strongly consider using this program within their classrooms.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Danielle Landry

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

CS 217 094

Can Writer's Workshop be Successful in First Grade?

What is Writer's Workshop?

If you were to enter my classroom on a Friday afternoon, you would see a few children spread out on my back rug, a few more scattered on the floor around the room, and maybe another handful seated at their desks. It may be difficult to find me, as I could be on the floor in a corner with one child, and not even see or hear you walk in. At first you will think that this is not a teaching time of the day. However, if you step into the room and wander around, you will see that this is far from the truth. What will you see? You will see children reading each other's pieces together, or children helping one another with a spelling word. You could find me on the floor listening to a child read a story and making suggestions on how to make it better. There also may be children under tables writing so intensely, you do not want to bother them. What my class is so involved in, is Writer's Workshop.

Writer's Workshop is a program that teaches children the conventions of writing. Students not only learn about proper grammar and punctuation, they also come to learn and value the importance of drafting, revising, and editing their pieces of writing. This type of writing process provides children with numerous opportunities to practice and internalize what goes into a piece of writing just as a professional author does (Reising, 1997). Additionally, children learn how conferencing with the teacher as well as with their peers can help them become better writers. Research has shown that this type of writing process increases student's independence and self-efficacy (Clippard, 1998).

Writer's workshop has been termed "authentic" by Nancie Atwell, because students write about what is important to them. They focus on what interests them, just as professional writers do. Their lives and own experiences is what the children use to select topics they write about (Clippard, 1998). Even as early as Kindergarten, children learn the routines and practices that expert writers use in their writing.

Writer's Workshop is a predictable time that occurs daily for 45 to 60 minutes. According to Nancie Atwell, there has been research that indicates if children foresee writing every day; they will start to acquire habits of a good writer. Atwell further suggests that these good habits include students thinking about writing all the time, not just during "writing time". This equates to a more proficient writer. (Clippard, 1998). If my day does not include Writer's Workshop, my students become very upset with me. "What do you mean we can't have writing today?" "I was going to conference with you today." Lucy Calkins, director of the Writing Project at Teacher's College at Columbia University has stated in her book that Writer's Workshop must be kept "predictable and simple". (Calkins 1983, p. 23). She explains that as teachers, we decide how to structure our Writer's Workshop. It is up to us to scaffold and guide the class towards becoming a community of good writers. This is not an easy task to complete and takes time to establish rules and routines.

What are the components of Writer's Workshop?

➢ *The Mini-Lesson*

One part of Writer's Workshop is the mini-lesson. The mini-lesson can occur at the beginning or the end of writing. This is a time when the teacher can meet with the whole class and discuss a writing concern, look at an issue at hand, model techniques, or reinforce a skill (Caulkins, 1986). Lucy Calkins believes that "in mini-lessons, we teach into our student's intentions" (Calkins, 1986 p. 193). In other words, mini-lessons allow teachers to use the children's work to teach them to better themselves as writers. Usually I begin my writer's workshop with a mini-lesson. We gather on the rug as a whole class, and I present my brief lesson. It is important to keep in mind that a mini-lesson is no more than 5 to 10 minute long. If it is longer than this, your lesson becomes a maxi-lesson.

As mentioned earlier, structure is important during writer's workshop. Therefore, one type of mini-lesson focuses on procedural issues (Calkins, 1986). For example, my class knows that each month new folder monitors are chosen to get the folders, (which contains their writing) for the children at their table. It is the folder monitors responsibility to hand out the folders at the start of writer's workshop and to collect them at the end. Another issue I ran into with the class was what to do if a student needs to conference with me and I am busy. I was noticing that many children would stop writing until they can speak with me. During a mini-lesson, I explained that they were wasting valuable writing time. The class and I devised a list of what to do if they were stuck and could not

conference immediately with me. First, ask a friend to help out; mark the spot you need help on, and go on; and reread your piece to see if this will help the problem. The students began to realize that they did not need to conference with me as much as they thought they did.

Another type of mini-lesson is modeling strategies that all writers need to use (Calkins, 1986). For example, demonstrating the importance of punctuation. One common problem most teachers run into, particularly in first grade, is student's habit of not using periods at the end of sentences. What I do is read my own piece without the use of periods. I make sure to read my writing without taking a breath. The children are quick to point out that I read it too fast. I then teach them the importance of periods. Other strategies include the idea of editing and revising pieces, which imprints in student's minds the importance of re-reading pieces not only for punctuation but also for content and meaning. I find when modeling writing strategies, a good thing to do is chart them, so students can continually refer to them. Sometimes a mini-lesson may stem from a student's piece. For example, I may share with the class a style of writing one particular child used such as repetition. In this type of mini-lesson I suggest that students try it in their writing. Here I stress the word *suggest* as I do not expect every child to write this way. Once again I reiterate that mini-lessons are not dictated speeches, but a time to present and empower students with tools and strategies needed to become better writers.

Mini-lessons can also create that community of great writers within your classroom. Lucy Calkins eloquently says, "to create the warm glow around the

workshop... is to read aloud from wonderful literature (Calkins, 1986 p. 194). You may read a poem or a story to the class. The purpose is not to turn writing time into reading time. I often tell my class to listen as a writer. Reading literature to your class provides the children with making connections to their own lives, or choosing a favorite author's style he or she may choose to use in their own writing. Hindley, 1996). In my first grade class, a favorite is Donald Crews. It is important to note that if you decide to read a piece of literature to your class during a mini-lesson, it should usually a re-read. Joanne Hindley states in her book that if you want to point out something an author has done, you cannot expect students to learn from a story the class has not heard before (Hindley, 1996). My suggestion is at the beginning of the year, choose a few books of different genres that you can refer to continually throughout the year. My favorites include Donald Crews' Bigmamas, poems by Eloise Greenfield and Valerie Worth, and Margaret Wise Brown's The Important Book. One important thing I learned at Teacher's College was that reading and re-reading books that you deeply love to your class, will enable these children to see the messages the author is conveying in his or her writing.

- ***Conferencing***

After the mini-lesson, students find their "writing spots" and begin to work. I allow my students to choose where they wish to work. However, as mentioned earlier, a procedural issue that can be taken care of in a mini-lesson, could be-finding my best writing spot. There are occasions when I will move a child if I feel that they need to find a spot where they can work better. It is during this writing

time that conferring occurs. An important thing I learned from Ms. Calkins' book was that conferencing is "the heart of our teaching" (Calkins, p. 189, 1983). Conferencing allows students to discuss problems in their writing, and to figure out ways to solve them. It also enables children to reflect on their own understanding of their writing (Clippard, 1998). As the children go off to write, I like to walk around the room and get a sense of where the children are at in their piece. At the beginning of the year, I found a majority of my individual conferences focused on taking risks as writers. Many children were afraid to write if they could not spell a word. I encouraged children to stretch out sounds, writing the letters they heard. During my conferences, I would help a child to stretch words, and leave them feeling confidant so that they can continue writing on their own. Conferences are also a good way for me to assess where my children are at. For example, I can see who knows the letters in the alphabet, and who needs extra help. It is very important that during a conference, the teacher allows the child to speak about his or her writing. A conference is not about taking over and telling the child what to do. It is getting them to gain independence and to learn a new skill that will enhance their writing.

Conferences also allow students to discuss problems that they are running into during writing. I still find difficulty in pausing and allowing time for the child to speak. Sometimes what seems like a long time is only seconds. Donald Graves (1983) has conducted research that showed children have a 45-second wait time before speaking or answering a question. The hardest part of a conference is looking beyond punctuation and grammar and seeing the potential the child has

as a writer. A teacher must carefully listen to the child read his piece, and think about the content and style of writing the child is using (Graves 1983). It is difficult, but teachers must look at a child's piece as a "work in progress" and not cringe at every mechanical error. Conferences will lead the child towards their final piece, but it takes time.

Another type of conferencing is peer-conferencing. It is important that children not only learn how to write, but also be able to find strengths and weaknesses as well as make suggestions towards other peer's writing (Reising, 1997). In my room, I encourage partners and small groups to meet and read their pieces to each other. I have found that students enjoy helping each other. It also prevents a back up of students waiting to conference with me.

- ***Sharing***

The conclusion of writer's workshop usually ends with a share. The class gathers back at the meeting area to share. Luck Calkins (1983) writes in her book that there are two purposes for share time. The first is to give encouragement to children's pieces of writing. The second is to publicly allow a teacher conference. This not only helps the particular child that is sharing, but may help students who are listening to apply the advice towards their own pieces. I believe that share time is important because it builds the children's confidence in public speaking, and also allows them to get ideas not only from the teacher, but also from their peers. One student in my class began his share by telling the class that he was not done with his piece, but wanted to get the children's opinion.

Another type of share that is very formal, is the celebration of the final publication. After the draft is revised and edited by the individual, peers, and the teacher, the child publishes his or her best work. The number of celebrations varies from class to class. I try to have a celebration every month or two. A writing celebration consists of the children sharing their final piece with an audience. It is up to the teacher's discretion who the audience will be. For instance, it could just be a celebration with their peers, parents can be invited, or even faculty from school. I enjoy inviting the parents in so they can see the accomplishments of their child. A writing celebration is a closing to weeks of hard work and determination of the children. It makes them feel like real authors!

Does Writer's Workshop teach children to be better writers?

Speaking as a first grade teacher, the pressure to get children to write well before second grade is a long, hard task. Furthermore, elementary teachers are pressured to get students prepared with proper writing skills for middle school, and the pressure to prepare students with proper writing skills continues into the High school years. Additionally, throughout these academic years, students are expected to perform on a variety of state tests. The question I have asked myself as a teacher is, does Writer's Workshop prepare children for the up coming expectations in writing in school as well as in the real world?

Teacher and author Regie Routman has found that the more time spent on writing gives children the practice and experience needed to become a more proficient writer Hereford, 2000). Further, writing is not just about grammar and punctuation. It is about content! This is defining my goals in writer's workshop.

A colleague asked me how I always find time in my day for writing. My response to her was it is something that I have to find time for. Children need to write on a continual basis in order to improve. Just as they have to practice their reading skills, and math skills. There was research completed that indicated encoding language (writing) is connected with decoding language (reading). Therefore children who read frequently, will write frequently and vice-versa. In order to attain such results, there has to be more teaching time devoted to teaching children how to write (Hereford, 2000).

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is a survey that reports on children's academic success in 4^{th}, 8^{th}, and 12^{th} grade. In 1998, a national writing assessment was conducted in the aforementioned grades. Results were found for the Nation and for the participating states and other jurisdictions. Student's writing scores were determined on a scale form 0-300. Students were categorized under three areas: Basic, Proficient, and Advanced (Greenwald, Persky, Campbell, & Mazzeo, 1999). Results indicated that 84% of fourth and eighth graders, and 78% of twelfth graders achievement, measured at the Basic Level; 23, 27, and 22% measured at the Proficient Level; and only 1% in all three grades measured at the Advanced level (Greenwald, Persky, Campbell, & Mazzeo, 1999). More than 80% of the students in all three grades indicated that their teachers conference with them about their writing. This same percentage of students also reported that sometimes teachers asked for more than one draft on a piece. These students received a higher average in their writing skills (Greenwald, persky, Campbell, & Mazzeo, 1999).

Further research has shown that good writers spend time planning their writing, spend a longer time at the pre-writing stage, and are more careful about content (NCES , 1996). Writer's Workshop encourages all of these skills. Currently, my class is in the middle of a Memoir study. They have been writing various pieces of memoir and soon will decide on a piece that can be focused on more attentively. They spent a great deal of time in the pre-writing stage. For example, the children brought in "memory boxes". We spent time talking about our treasures with each other. The class then drew a Map of their hearts in which they filled with thoughts, words, and pictures. We are currently choosing things from our hearts and memory boxes to write about. I am also continually conferencing with the children, and allowing them to freely write down their thoughts.

The NAEP results can be viewed negatively, as only 1% of our nation's children is at an advanced level of writing. However, if one looks at it in a positive manner, 75% of our Nation's children have the ability to write on an average level (Hereford, 2000). The National Council of Teachers proposes that more writing assessments be utilized in the classroom in order to help teachers find the tools necessary to produce good writers.

How do you make your students good writers?

I am such an advocate for utilizing Writer's Workshop in the classroom. Not only does it help children become better writers; it helps teachers to re-think how they are teaching the art of writing to their students. Based on the basic

foundations of Writer's Workshop, I comprised a list of questions for first grade teachers to answer.

Teachers who responded to the questions have used writer's workshop in their classroom for over five years. I decided that in order to determine whether Writer's Workshop was an essential part of an elementary classroom, I had to ask teachers who used it on a regular basis. Further, it was important to find out if teachers monitored their children's progress in writing, and also reassessed their teaching skills to make room for improvement.

Six teachers responded. Three were first grade teachers from New York City, and three first grade teachers were from upper Westchester, New York. The teachers were asked to answer questions that focused around writer's workshop. All six teachers used writer's workshop in their classroom on a daily basis for 45 minutes to an hour each day. When asked if their students were able to choose what they wanted to write about, teachers all agreed that writer's workshop was a time for self -choice. However, children chose a topic within the genre they were studying.

Another important question that was posed to all teachers was how they edit and revise with the children. The answers were almost verbatim in that the teachers believed that the most important aspect of editing was to make changes in pieces to "make them better". Spelling and grammar were also important; however teachers felt that this was not always the focus. One teacher stated that if periods and capital letters were taught then they were held accountable for it. In terms of spelling, teachers felt words that were grade appropriate must be

correctly spelled. What I found to be most important that all teachers stated with the editing process was that peers were involved in helping to determine if the story made sense, not the teacher.

When asked how frequently did they conference with their students and what type of routines did they have, all six teachers responded that they had some type of record keeping system, from notebooks, binders, to clipboards. One teacher has the children write their names on the board when they are ready to conference, while another tries to conference with a new group every three to four days. When asked if they kept samples of their student's work in some type of portfolio, all teachers answered yes. Pieces were chosen from various times of year. Half of the teachers chose the pieces that were placed in the portfolio, while half let their children choose. When asked about second draft re-writes, teachers believed that they were important only for pieces that were going to be published. The final question posed to the teachers was, overall, to explain three important skills that your students have learned as writers in writer's workshop. All teachers agreed that writing has a purpose and is an important form of communication. They also agreed that their students have learned to become an independent writer takes time and practice. Finally, they conveyed that writing is not just spelling and grammar, but content!

I found this questionnaire has demonstrated that writer's workshop is a realistic way of teaching writing to children. I hope more people that do not use writer's workshop will now consider trying it in their classrooms. I think people, who are not familiar with writer's workshop, thinks it is too unstructured to work.

However, this is far from the truth. As aforementioned answers from typical first grade teachers indicates there is structure. For instance, while children do get to choose their topic, it must pertain to the genre they are studying. Therefore, if a class is learning how to write a picturebook, than they must stay within that area. Also, it is important to note that while content is the main focus during writer's workshop, skills are still taught. In one class, a teacher told me that they are responsible for spelling thirty commonly known sight words by June. This also is expected in pieces done at writer's workshop time. Additionally, there are a great number of mini-lessons that are devoted to teaching skills involved in writing. Finally, writer's workshop produces independent writers. It is a great feeling to know that your class could spend up to 60 minutes writing on their own not depending on a teacher for every step. I leave you with this, have you ever been in class on a Friday afternoon at the end of the day and told your class it is time to get ready for home, and your class answer, "NO, five more minutes of writing". I have!!!!

References

Calkins, L. M. (1994). *The art of teaching writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Calkins, L. M., with Harwayne, S. (1991). *Living between the lines*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Clippard, D. (1998). Efficacy of writer's workshop for students with significant writing deficits. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 13(1), 7-26.

Graves, D. (1983). *Writing: Teachers and children at work*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Greenwald, E. A., Persky, H. R., Campbell, J. R., & Mazzeo, J. (1999, September). The NAEP 1998 writing report card for the nation and the states. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. Office of Educational Research and improvement. National Center for Educational Statistics.

Hereford, N. (ed.). (2000). Will new writing assessments create better writers? *Time for Teachers*, 1(3), 1-3.

Hindley, J. (1996). *In the company of children*. York, Maine: Stenhouse Publishers.

National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES). (1996, April). Can students benefit from process writing? *NCES*, 1 (3).

Reising, B. (1997). The formative assessment of writing. *The Clearing House*. 71, 1-2.